

КРАСНОРЕЧИВОЕ МОЛЧАНИЕ, ИЛИ КАК ПРИУЧИТЬ СТУДЕНТОВ ТЕХНИЧЕСКОГО ВУЗА ГОВОРИТЬ НА АНГЛИЙСКОМ (ИЗ ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЬСКОГО ОПЫТА)

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Аннотация. В данной статье описывается эксперимент, направленный на развитие и продвижение коммуникативных навыков у студентов технических вузов. В статье анализируются возможности такого интерактивного метода, как свободная речевая деятельность на занятиях по английскому языку с группой студентов, для которых вербальное общение не представляло интереса из-за неумения слушать собеседника, различий в языковом уровне, психологической несовместимости с людьми, вовлеченными в общение. Принцип обучения, заложенный в исследовании, предполагал определенную последовательность действий, которые имели конкретные цели и задачи обучения. Исследование основано на сравнительном анализе результатов ролевых интервью, проведенных студентами-"соискателями" до и после применения вышеупомянутого подхода. Полученные результаты, во-первых, указывают на возможность успешного регулирования баланса коммуникативной деятельности в аудитории, что естественным образом сокращает время говорения для преподавателя и увеличивает время для развития и совершенствования навыков говорения для студентов. Во-вторых, благодаря использованию данной методики студенты преодолели психологические барьеры, вызванные боязнью говорить и делать ошибки. В целом, эксперимент позволил не только повлиять на улучшение речевых навыков студентов, но и выявить высокий потенциал метода свободной речевой деятельности для неязыковых вузов, где, как известно, изучение иностранных языков не является основным предметом.

Ключевые слова: коммуникативные навыки, метод/подход, свободная речевая деятельность, английский как второй язык, обучение навыкам говорения.

SPEAKING UNPLUGGED, OR WHAT TO DO TO GET ESL STUDENTS CHATTING (FROM A TEACHING EXPERIENCE AT A TECHNICAL UNIVERSITY)

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Abstract. The present paper describes an experiment aimed at the development and promotion of communication skills in students at technical higher educational institutions. This article analyzes the possibilities of such an interactive method as free-speaking activity in English classes with a group of students for whom verbal communication was not of interest due to the inability to listen to the interlocutor, differences in the level of language proficiency, and psychological incompatibility with people involved in communication. The principle of training laid down in the research implied a certain sequence of actions that had specific goals and training objectives. The study is based on the comparative analysis of the results of role-play interviews performed by students – “job seekers” – prior to and after the application of the aforementioned approach. The results obtained, first of all, indicate the possibility of successfully regulating the balance of communicative activity in the classroom, which naturally reduces the time of speaking for the teacher and increases the time for developing and improving speaking skills for students. Second, through the use of this method, students overcame psychological barriers caused by the fear of speaking and making mistakes. In general, the experiment facilitated not only influencing the improvement of students’ speaking skills, but also discovering the high potential of the free-speaking activity method for non-linguistic universities, where, as is known, foreign language learning is not a leading subject.

Keywords: communication skills, approach, free-speaking activity, English as a second language, teaching speaking skills.

Introduction

There are many key ideas for the future and transformation of universities. Research in the field of Global Education Futures determines many modern trends such as the automation of the world, the digitization of society, the rise of a net-centric society, the growth of complexity that must be taken into account. These trends drive up demands on specialists in any field and have a great impact on the education and future skills of students. Communication, collaboration, teamwork, empathy, problem-solving are essential competencies for the future worker [1].

In a working environment, an individual needs to collect, process, and transfer information quickly and successfully in order to implement communicative activities, and this requires the availability of communicative abilities at the appropriate level. The problem of the formation of the individual's communicative abilities is due to the growing need to increase the effectiveness of interpersonal communicative activities. It is known that on-the-job interpersonal communication is one of the most important conditions for the optimal implementation of any kind of professional activity.

The success of communicative activity in the process of interpersonal communication is conditioned by the communicative abilities of the subject. Their structure includes: communicative knowledge and skills, communicative competence, and communication skills in the field of interpersonal information interactions.

There is a growing need for the individual and society as a whole in the effective implementation of interpersonal (business) communications in the modern world. Communicative abilities on a high level, allow the individual to deal with information and communication environments in various social organizations (at the enterprise, company, etc.), and make optimal managerial and other decisions that determine the achievement of goals and the effectiveness of the implementation of professional skills.

This significant function of interpersonal communication as an impact (in the case of systemic, intersubjective, subject-object interaction) can result in an increase in the qualitative level of realization of any kind of human activity, because communicative activity is not only an individual trait, but also a condition for the reproduction of social interaction in the course of any activity.

As applied to teaching foreign languages, it is necessary to state the problematic character, difficulty and labor-intensity of communication skills formation because of the complexity of their nature. Our research aim is to improve students' communication skills at a technical university.

Literature review

The review of works on the aforementioned topic allows us to identify several directions in scientific thought:

1. The problem of development and activation of communicative skills in students at any university is considered in scientific works of researchers indirectly, in the framework of studying diverse language skills (I.L. Bim [2], E.M. Vereshchagin [3], N.D. Gal'skova, N.I. Gez [4], R.P. Milrud, A.B. Matienko [5], E.I. Passov [6]).
2. Determination of the term «communicative skills», which is often understood as a definition of «communication». In turn, in foreign and domestic sources, the concept of communication is viewed as:

- a way to improve interpersonal relationships and create a pleasant psychological environment [1. p. 115];
- an ability to apply language skills correctly in different situations;
- communicative traits of the personality [7. p. 286];
- the ongoing fragmentation of knowledge and resulting chaos in philosophy are not reflections of the real world but artifacts of scholarship [8. p. 8];
- what is transmitted from the beginning of one process to the output of a process with the inverse functionality of the first process. [9. p. 18].

By the way, in this article, the term communication will be treated as an ability to apply language skills correctly in different situations.

3. The psychological aspect of the problem of communication skills. That was studied by N.I. Zhinkin [10], A.A. Leont'ev [11], I.A. Zimniaia [12], etc., and abroad by N.V. Baudouin de Courtenay [13], D.E. Broadbent [14], A. Gardiner [15], etc.

L.S. Vygotskii conceptualized the process of speech production, the progress from thought to word to external speech as follows: "...from the motive that engenders a thought, to the formulation of that thought, its mediation by the inner word, and then by the meanings of external words, and finally, by words themselves" [16. p. 83]. He singled out the following sequence of phases (stages) in speech production:

1st stage – the motive ("vague desire" or "a sensation of a task");

2nd stage – the speech intention ("a thought");

3rd stage – the thought mediated by inner speech (the inner program, inner speech, and inner pronunciation, talking to oneself);

4th stage – the implementation of the inner program;

5th stage – the process of the acoustic-articular and morphological implementation of the program ("the representation of thought in "external words") [16. pp. 53–54].

I.A. Zimniaia points out the following phases of the speech generation: causative-motivation, analytic-synthetic and performing. In accordance with these phases, there are three levels of speech generation:

1st phase – motivational-inducing; it is a complex interaction of needs, motives and goals as a future result of an action, an "alloy" of motives and communicative intentions. Here the motive is the fact that explains the character of the speech act, and the communicative intention expresses the aim of the speaker [17. p. 71];

2nd phase – formatting. This stage is represented by two processes: sense generation and formation. At the phase of sense generation, the general idea of the speaker is produced [17. p. 74]. At the stage of formatting the speaker must hold in the memory not only the sense of speech but also the foreign lexical and grammatical means which are intended to express it;

3rd phase – implementing. In the process of speaking, this level is apparently pronounced, because here articulation and intonation take place [17. p. 77].

Taking into account the extent of which the problem of development and activation of communicative skills in students at technical universities is considered in scientific works, it requires extra attention.

Materials and Methods

As a rule, when studying communication issues, the following research methods prove to be effective:

- theoretical: a method of theoretical analysis and synthesis as applied to the subject of study, comparative method;
- empirical: analysis of scientific and methodical literature, scientific observation.

Moreover, a methodological experiment can be considered as the basic method of studying communication within the process of learning communication skills. By this method we understand a specially organized process of foreign language instruction, when we activate verbal communication by changing individual conditions, methods, teaching aids). To implement this method, we need to use the statistical methods as the best way to facilitate an analysis of research results. This method aims to collect, synthesize, and analyze quantitative indicators obtained during experiments. The above referenced methods were used as the basis for the research presented to obtain an objective assessment of the progress of communication skills in the given conditions.

Research results

Encouraging students to speak has been a major problem for most teachers of English as a foreign language for a long time, despite the fact that modern teachers assume a wide range of roles (as a resource supporter, as a manager, as an instructor, as a mentor, as an investigator, as a controller and as an assessor) to support student success and their communication skills development [18. p. 154]. The problem is that not all students take great interest in studying. They prefer to be a passive learner and are not eager to be involved in the learning process. Certainly, we bear in mind that in our culture talking to students is a natural thing to do, and it is inevitably a theatrical side to language teaching. According to the modern methodology, a teacher's presence in the classroom should take about 20–30 % of the time, while a student's is about 70–80 %. If we speak about intermediate learners, the results are 60 % for the teacher's presence and 40 % for the students. It leads to bad consequences, such as loss of concentration, boredom, a monotonous pace of work, low opportunities for developing speaking skills. Eventually, students are not ready for taking charge of their own learning in the service of their needs and purposes but learn what and when the teacher decides. Learners' active participation in and responsibility for their own learning process are essential in the field of foreign language learning [19]. The learner needs to be willing to "act independently and in cooperation with others, as a socially responsible person", especially if we speak about the formation and development of communication skills [19. pp. 18–37].

If the teacher is resourceful and skillful enough, various methods can be used to improve communication skills. The following methods are commonly used by teachers:

- Planning discussion topics. Students should be familiar with or feel comfortable with the material. It should not be boring, too complicated, or too abstract for them. The idea is to design topics of discussion that refer to information gained from general experience or basic data in the subject area. The most challenging problem we face is a lack of knowledge, vocabulary, and grammar. Some kind of prior preparation work, noting difficult issues or potential problems must be done, so that students get into an extended conversation;
- Leading pair and group work. Students can work together to combine their expertise, knowledge and skills, they "teach" each other. Understanding is

improved through additional discussion, elicitation and explanation. Giving guidance and answering questions when needed is important for teachers. Breaking students into pairs or groups, encouraging them to participate. Calling on students and assigning roles can be laborious for us because of interpersonal relationships among students. Creating a good climate and showing respect for students can increase the quality of discussion and the number of participants. Some teachers become impatient when students don't give them a rapid response. They begin prompting, providing clues and rephrasing the question which is ineffective. "Processing time" is needed for students to come up with the right response.

However, planning discussion work or leading pair work is not always productive. Many teachers focus most of their efforts on drilling and repetitions of some phrases or dialogues. But at some point, students need to have speaking activities that will allow them to improve their communication skills, which takes a lot more than a repetition of phrases. Free-speaking activities, which we draw our attention to in the article, are perfect for this. This is not the time to speak about whatever students want, with no given objectives or goal. Free speaking means that students have the chance to use the language resources they deem to be necessary or useful to achieve the task.

There are 3 essential Ps in language teaching: PRESENTATION (introduction of topic/new vocabulary/language item), PRACTICE (drilling and repetition) and PERFORMANCE. Free speaking corresponds to performance. It's the chance students have to put everything they've learned to good use.

Here are the main points to consider when using free-speaking activities during lessons.

ESL Checklist for Effective Free-speaking Activities

Does it have a clear learning goal?

Why are you using this free-speaking task? Are you giving your class a chance to practice the vocabulary they've just learned? Review grammar, phrases or expressions? Free-speaking activities can't just be a time to speak freely, there has to be some connection to something students have been presented and practiced recently. Say you recently taught them expressions for agreeing/disagreeing. Give them a chance to use them!

Is there a clear objective?

Students won't know if they have successfully achieved the learning goal if they don't know what the task objective is. Do they have to reach an agreement? Find a solution to a problem? Brainstorm ideas? Here are some examples of speaking tasks with clear objectives:

- Students must reach an agreement on where to have a friend's surprise party;
- One student tells the class about his/her way to master English, for example.

The rest of the class has to provide ideas for education;

- Students discuss ways to protect the environment and come up with a list of 10 ideas they can start implementing today.

Is it fun/interesting/appropriate?

It goes without saying that the success of the activity hinges on how engaged your students are. And activities that are not fun or interesting will fail to engage

them. Try tailoring each activity to your student's interests and level. For a group of Business English learners, change the surprise birthday party scenario mentioned above; have the class reach an agreement on where to host a conference/meeting.

Is it competitive?

Young students and teens, in particular, thrive in healthy competition. Is there a way of breaking the class into teams, so they can compete to provide the best ideas, most ideas, or best results? See which group comes up with the most ideas to protect the environment.

Is it challenging?

Speaking tasks that are too easy will be over in 5 minutes. Good speaking tasks last at least 10-15 minutes – remember you want to give your students a chance to speak. Have you introduced an obstacle or complication they must overcome? Here are some complications for the surprise birthday party scenario:

- Give them a limited budget.
- Tell them that because it's winter, they can't have the party outdoors.
- They only have three days left to plan and buy everything!

Will there be something to report in the end?

Good free-speaking tasks give students something they can summarize/report to the rest of the class. Will they be able to provide an action plan for the surprise birthday party? A list of tasks and who's responsible for each?

Is it structured?

What is the procedure your students should follow? Is it clear? A structured activity gives students who are not so confident a frame of reference to support them. For the birthday party scenario, give students the items they must decide on:

- venue;
- food;
- music;
- date and time;
- number of guests;
- etc...

Can it be repeated?

When they are done, and you give them your feedback, can they re-enact it? Reenactments give them a chance to fine-tune things that were not done well so that they can improve their previous performance. Did they forget to decide on a date and time? No one's taking care of the music? Re-enact the discussion and try not to forget these points.

*Is there enough room
for students to show their creativity?*

Even structured free-speaking tasks need to give students enough wiggle room to make adjustments as they go, and find creative solutions to problems. If there's no money for the DJ, one of your students may volunteer to be the DJ for the night.

What you need to do is to create an environment where students speak freely, not a free-for-all. Such a free-speaking strategy gives students the possibility to use the language resources they find important and appropriate to achieve their task.

To prove the relevance and viability of this method, we used an interview as an example of a free-speaking activity. The choice was made for the following reason: an interview gives a chance to students to talk about themselves – their strengths, achievements, and personal qualities. Most people are nervous about taking part in a conversation. One way to reduce anxiety and perform better is to get an opportunity to be in the role of an interviewer and be able to observe someone else as well as being the interviewee. The target audience of our study were bachelor students of Nizhny Novgorod State Technical University named after R.E. Alekseev (specialties of Nuclear Physics and Reactors, and Electrical engineering). 42 senior students took part in our study. They had good and excellent marks in English. They have studied English for 3 years. The participants of the study were given a task to apply for a job for which they were trained. They were to take part in a job interview with a foreign employer. Our experiment was divided into 2 stages. At the beginning of the research (in the first stage of our experiment) students were asked to complete this task without any demands as a part of free-speaking activity. After analyzing their results participants were asked to do the mentioned task but before we had used the strategy called free-speaking activities. The task was assessed according to the following rating scale on both accounts (see Table 1).

Table 1

Rating scale				
	Range	Accuracy	Communicative effectiveness	Listening comprehension
3	Uses a wide range of simple language to deal with familiar business situations.	Lexical and grammatical accuracy is generally high. There may be occasional errors but these do not impede communication.	Is able to get the message across clearly.	Understands clear standard speech reasonably well.
2	Uses a limited range of simple language to deal with the most familiar business situations. May need to pause but manages to produce an adequate range of vocabulary and structures.	Lexical and grammatical accuracy is low, but most errors do not impede communication.	Is able to get the message across, although this may require some support or effort.	Understands slow clear standard speech.
1	Uses a severely limited range of language. May need to pause but still cannot produce an adequate range of vocabulary and structures.	Lexical and grammatical accuracy is very low. Nearly all utterances contain inaccuracies which impede communication.	Is not able to get the message across.	Understands very slow and carefully articulated speech.
0	Not enough language to evaluate.	Not enough language to evaluate.	Not enough language to evaluate.	Not enough language to evaluate.

The results are presented in pie charts. Each colored pie slice is marked by numbers 0,1,2,3. These numbers correspond to the description of evaluation criteria given in the table above. The quantity of students who completed tasks according to evaluation criteria (range, accuracy, communicative effectiveness, listening comprehension) is shown in the pie charts (see Figure 1).

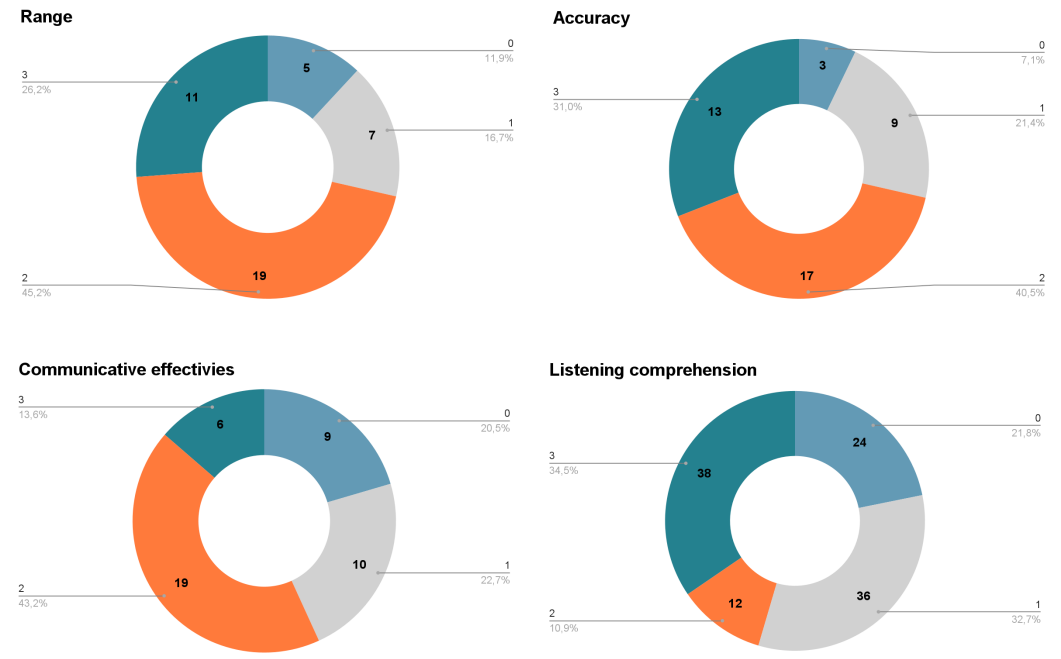


Figure 1. The number of students who completed the tasks in accordance with the assessment criteria

The results presented in the pie charts showed us range and accuracy averages as well as low communicative efficiency and listening comprehension. Then, the students of the experimental group were given weekly English lessons and asked to complete different free-speaking activities. The examples of free-speaking activities during our lessons varied: interviews, describing photos, debating, and presentations. For instance, students discussed ways to protect the environment and came up with 10 Energy-saving tips in their homes. We tried to select topics that are focused on their future occupation and profession, for example, Tools, Resistors, Capacitors, and Transmission lines are motivating for students of Electrical Engineering. Following the first stage, the second diagnostics of speaking skills was conducted. A job interview was given as an assessment task. The results were the following (see Figure 2).

Judging by the results of the second experimental stage, the indicators of communicative efficiency and listening comprehension have increased. The range and accuracy indicators have improved a little. A free-speaking activity turns out not to be a universal remedy, but it solves the problem of high-quality communicative activity of students during the lessons.

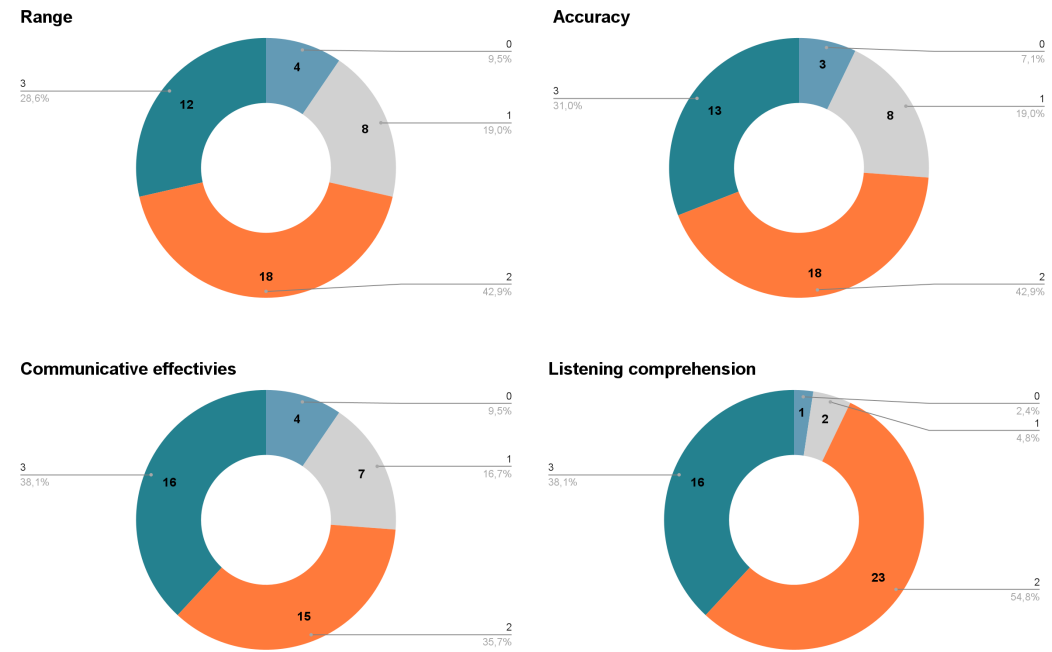


Figure 2. Interview results

Discussion and conclusions

A good speaking activity is not synonymous with free conversation time. By this term, we understand a particular sequence of actions that have specific teaching goals and objectives. It gives a purpose and reason for learning and means that students know why they are studying and how they can use the language not only inside but also outside the classroom, because free-speaking activities are designed to be as realistic as possible. Moreover, these activities give opportunities for learners to exchange ideas and opinions, as well as reflect on their needs and interests. Apart from that, a good speaking activity contributes to achieving the right balance during lessons.

The result of this study showed that students’ responses towards the strategies revealed a positive attitude as they responded that the strategies helped them to develop their speaking skills and reduce “the teacher speaking time”. However, it was indicated that some students employed more learning strategies consciously and appropriately compared to others. It is suggested that teachers use strategies of teaching speaking skills according to student characteristics and provide materials that actively engage students in the lesson.

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